

Decision shows need for better representation

Ben Williams

December 19, 2009

Once again a significant land-use decision has been made by our Marion County commissioners that demonstrates the interests of the few over the many, and whose process makes one wonder "whatever happened to representative government?"

The subject is the expansion of the city of Donald urban growth boundary, and the public part of the saga began with a hearing before the county commissioners (bypassing the planning commission) in September 2008.

The application included four pieces of property totaling 42.5 acres, all zoned EFU. Three small pieces adjoined existing businesses and the fourth was a 29-acre piece of agricultural land on the north side of town in active agriculture targeted to be developed as a warehouse/distribution center.

Friends of French Prairie, Marion County Farm Bureau and 1,000 Friends of Oregon all testified against the application, recognizing that any UGB expansion would have to take EFU land, supporting the three current business-related pieces but opposing the 29-acre piece. We recommended that the application be re-submitted without the 29-acre piece. That was ignored and the commissioners unanimously approved it.

Subsequently, FOFP and the Farm Bureau appealed to the Land Use Board of Appeals (LUBA), who remanded the approval finding that the city didn't comply with state land-use laws because it didn't estimate job growth and then determine how much land it needed but rather identified a type of employer it hoped to attract and set about adding the amount of land required, and that the city didn't notify other cities that it was revising its population forecast.

The city then hired a consultant to update and amend its population and job growth estimates and resubmitted its application, resulting in two back-to-back hearings.

Testimony against the application included the same concerns as the year before and pointed out the amount of available competing space in surrounding cities — over 2.5 million square feet.

An additional looming specter was the appearance of the Klamath Tribe trying to buy 385 acres at Langdon Farms to convert to trust lands in order to build a warehouse/distribution development. The city's revised plan was unanimously adopted and the commissioners immediately and unanimously approved the application.

So where are we after all of this?

Another block of prime French Prairie farm land has been re-zoned and will soon be lost to production. The traffic generated by the development will have a massive impact on Exit 278 and Ehlen Road but hardly any on the city of Donald. And throughout, our county commissioners dutifully ignored the voices of those impacted and only heard those promoting development.

Marion County residents should be aware that there is a current petition campaign for a 2010 ballot initiative to improve representation in Marion County from three commissioners elected at-large to five commissioners elected from districts by adoption of a charter. If there has been an example in the past decade of why this change in county governmental structure is needed, this is it.

It's time for county government to demonstrate some local sensitivity and representation.

Benjamin D. Williams of Aurora is president of Friends of French Prairie. He can be reached at bwilliams@friendsoffrenchprairie.org.